

Wilson promises peripheral canal decision

Pledges to choose by end of year, urges water peace

By Nancy Vogel
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MONTEREY — In a rare address to California's water leaders, Gov. Pete Wilson committed Wednesday to deciding, by year's end, whether a plan for the state's water future requires a peripheral canal, but he left open the possibility that his successor will sign off on a final plan.

Wilson exhorted hundreds of members of the Association of California Water Agencies to grasp "this crucial moment for California" and stick with the CalFed Bay-Delta Program, a four-year-old federal and state partnership attempting to end 20 years of California water wars.

CalFed is trying to build consensus among farmers, environmentalists and urban water agencies on the state's next generation of water development.

If CalFed fails, Wilson said, the

losers will be "those expectant mothers who fear the quality of their drinking water, the farmers who can't irrigate their crops and those who care about the fish that can't reach their upstream spawning grounds."

One of three options under consideration by CalFed is a canal around the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta that would carry Sacramento River water more directly to Southern California. It's a smaller version of a canal voters rejected in 1982.

All three plans include large-scale environmental restoration, investments in water conservation, and new or bigger reservoirs.

Wilson announced he will meet with U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt on Monday and urge him to give the public another 15 to 30 days to comment about CalFed's plans — but no more.

Public comment would otherwise close June 1. Several dozen parties involved in CalFed negotiations have asked for more time.

Noting California grew by 580,000 people last year, Wilson said, "We are growing by leaps and bounds, but we lack the reli-

able water supply required to meet our rapidly expanding needs.

"So we must do everything possible to bring the CalFed process to a successful conclusion by year's end," Wilson said. "We can't accept anything less."

Wilson didn't define a "successful conclusion." A ready-to-implement solution is still possible by year's end, unless Babbitt and Wilson extend the comment period beyond 30 days. That would leave too little time for CalFed to choose and finalize a plan by the time Wilson leaves office.

CalFed executive director Lester Snow described another possibility: Federal and state officials choose a plan this year — but as a draft plan, it is subject to public comment into 1999, after California has chosen a new governor.

"We're trying to find the best way to maintain momentum without blowing it apart," said Snow.

Urban and agricultural water interests welcomed Wilson's announcement.

"It's critical that we make some of the hard decisions this year," said Tim Quinn, deputy general



Pete Wilson

He said the state lacks the reliable water supply needed by its growing population.

manager of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. "There's going to be a lot of hard work and decision-making done by the next administration in Sacramento."

Barry Nelson, Save San Francisco Bay Association director, said, "Every water user needs time to digest these documents."

"The more important issue is, what does the governor want?" he said. "It was a little squishy."

In a sign that CalFed's fragile consensus is still intact so far, representatives of environmental, farm and urban water groups all refused to say Wednesday that a CalFed plan either must — or must not — include a peripheral canal.

Nelson's group long has opposed

such a canal, fearing it, would drain too much fresh water from the brackish Delta. He said CalFed would have to convince his group of the need for a canal.

Farm and urban representatives said they'll support a plan that delivers more and better quality water, regardless of whether it includes a Delta canal.

Since Wilson said "the Delta is broken" in a key 1992 water policy speech, he has worked to find a solution to the Delta's many ecological, physical and political problems. Its maze of rivers and sloughs is a source of drinking water for 22 million Californians, but also home to several species of endangered fish, whose presence can trigger shutdown of the state's major water project pumps.

CalFed, if it succeeds, could prove one of Wilson's most lasting achievements as governor, but Wilson said Wednesday he was more interested in maintaining CalFed's consensus.

"Far more important than any considerations of gubernatorial legacy," said Wilson, "is the plain necessity that California act now to secure its water future."